

Kingdom Come

by Donne Hayden

At seminary, I took a class titled “The Bible, Violence and Non-Violence.” Until then, I had successfully avoided reading the book of Revelation. And until I read Revelation, I hadn’t really thought much about the “kingdom of God,” assuming it referred to traditional ideas of Heaven I heard as a child in the Southern Baptist church or something to do with the end of the world. For the writer of Revelation, however, “kingdom” and “empire” are central images—the kingdom or empire of God is in conflict with the earthly empire of Rome.

In that class at seminary, the text we used in conjunction with reading Revelation was *Unveiling Empire* by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther. These authors gave me an entirely new way of reading the New Testament and thinking about the “Kingdom of God.” For instance, the authors contrasted our sense of time with that of people in the Mediterranean world two thousand years ago. Whereas Western Civilization is future-oriented, the ancient Near East was *present*-oriented, and in a present-oriented worldview, goals and objectives are located in the present, not in the future. Thus, “The Kingdom of God is at hand” i.e., the Kingdom of God is here, now.¹

¹ The world is very different in a present-oriented society, as I discovered in my first teaching job on the edge of the Navajo Reservation. The Navajo language has no word for “tomorrow” and no future tense for verbs. Asking a Navajo student to turn in an assignment next week made as much sense in his language as having no word for “tomorrow” does in our language.

Related somehow to this different sense of time, those who lived in the first century Near East could also hold in mind two distinct realities and perceive them as existing contemporaneously. Our language for this would probably be “parallel universes.” In the world, “on earth,” the Roman Empire was regarded as “a paragon of power and order” (though in the language of Revelation, “the Roman Empire was a Beast bent on bloodshed and a Whore set on seduction”). In “heaven,” the Empire of God was a place where Love ruled, where the poor were valued as highly as the rich, where the “least of these” was loved as dearly as those with prestige and status, and where compassion was the coin of the realm. Both empires—the empire of Rome and the empire (or kingdom) of God—existed simultaneously, in the same place, enmeshed in and overlapping each other.

The following sentence from *Unveiling Empire* changed forever how I understand the message of Christianity: “. . . wherever the lies and injustices of imperial Rome are given currency—there is earth. Wherever the truth of God is believed and practiced—there is heaven.” Suddenly I understood: people who emphasize the things of this world *live* in this world. People who emphasize the things of God *live* in the Kingdom of God, which is here, now, interwoven with our current form of empire. Though we may live in the same house with someone, we may live in different “kingdoms.” The kingdom of the world is mainstream culture, whereas the Kingdom of God exists in individual spiritual experience and in subcultures like religious groups, peace and justice activism, or the simplicity movement.

The world’s kingdom is loud, clamorous and competitive. Wealth, power, material goods, vanity and pleasure—these are manifestations of life in the world’s kingdom, and the subjects of advertising, which teaches us to want more, consume more, compete more. Think of

our entertainment—movies that stress grandiosity, sensationalism, violence, destruction and novelty. Even as they seek to impress and attract, they de-sensitize their audiences and so must resort to bigger and bigger bangs. Think of our insistence on information—not wisdom, just information, which we often use to advance ourselves and/or hurt others. Think of our culture’s focus on consumption—Once we have a house full of stuff, a garage over-flowing with extra stuff we can’t bring ourselves to part with, a refrigerator and freezer and cupboards crammed with food we frequently eat alone, you would think we’d be happy. But even when we have no more room to put more stuff, we go shopping. It’s a form of entertainment in the world’s kingdom. We can’t seem to get enough.

In contrast, the kingdom of God is not showy, aggressive, or competitive. The kingdom of God is found in simplicity, in silence, in quiet actions, in small things we do out of love, unconsciously, without motive or expectation of reward. Smiles of acceptance, encouragement or welcome, spontaneous sharing of space or food, lives dedicated to service, lives risked for others, all kindness and compassion. Whatever rises up in love originates in the kingdom of God.

This week, I discovered an interesting reference to the Kingdom of God *according to Quakers* in a Pendle Hill pamphlet by Howard Brinton. When I read Brinton’s explanation of how the first Friends understood the Kingdom of God, I realized how much it speaks to my condition, and how that very understanding alone would have led me to become a convinced Friend. From Pendle Hill pamphlet 156, *Ethical Mysticism in the Society of Friends*:

[Robert] Barclay speaks of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Quakerism as three forms of Christianity; the first depends on the authority of the Church, the second on the authority of the

Bible, and the third on the authority of the Spirit. The Quaker conception of the Kingdom of God is also different. Catholics considered the Church as potentially the Kingdom of God, Protestants though that in this evil and fallen world the perfection of the Kingdom was impossible except beyond the grave. Whereas Quakers believed that any person by being perfect as far as his insight and ability permitted, or, to employ the usual Quaker term, if he acted according to the "measure" [of Light] given him would belong to the Kingdom of God here and now by living according to the Sermon on the Mount, including its apparently impracticable standard of pacifism. (15)

A little later in the pamphlet, Brinton remarks that "The Quakers seldom said anything about 'the last days,'" and George Fox often claimed that "Christ had already come." Quakers' "mysticism becomes ethical," writes Brinton, "when it leads them to enter the Kingdom and live according to the teachings of Christ."

Theologians have a word for the belief that the Kingdom of God is already here on earth: "realized eschatology," –"realized" meaning it has already happened, and "eschatology" referring to the end times. According to the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, a realized eschatology "holds that Jesus understood the kingdom of God to have arrived with himself." Consider verses such as these: "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,'" and "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" and "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say *Look, here it is!* or *There it is!* For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you'" (Lk 17:20).

The earliest Quakers had a realized eschatology; that is, they understood the “kingdom of God” *not as future development but as imminent reality*. George Fox asserted that Christ had come to teach the people himself. Thus the Kingdom of God is accessed through living as Jesus instructed us in the Sermon on the Mount and through listening to the guidance of the “Inner Christ.” As George Fox phrased it, “I saw what was cast out from God and what entered into His kingdom, how by Jesus—the door’s opener by His heavenly key—entrance was given.” In other words, Jesus brought to humanity instructions for how to “enter” the Kingdom of God, instructions available to all who follow the Inner Christ or Inner Teacher, whether or not they ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth. In describing a meeting for worship, Fox said, “We do earnestly desire and wait, that, by the Word of God’s power, and its effectual operation in the hearts of men, the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of the Lord and of his Christ.”

William Penn and the Quakers who settled Pennsylvania and governed it according to Quaker principles, in effect, made the Kingdom of God manifest to all for a few decades. The foundation for what became known as the “holy Experiment” was based on choosing the way of the Kingdom of God over the way of the world’s kingdoms. Penn said, for instance:

We are too ready to retaliate, rather than forgive, or gain by Love and Information.

And yet we could hurt no Man that we believe loves us.

Let us then try what Love will do: For if Men did once see we Love them, we should soon find they would not harm us.

Force may subdue, but Love gains: And he that forgives first, wins the Laurel.

Another Quaker eloquent on the subject of the imminence of Kingdom of God was the great reformer and abolitionist, Lucretia Mott. In an address to the Anti-Sabbath Convention of 1848, Mott said of the Kingdom of God: “We wait for no imagined millennium—no speculation or arithmetical calculation—no Bible research—to ascertain when this shall be. It only needs that people examine for themselves—not pin their faith on ministers’ sleeves, but do their own thinking, obey the truth, and be made free.” Twenty years later, in an address to the Free Religious Association, Mott said,

The kingdom of God is always nigh at hand. It was nigh at hand when Jesus declared it eighteen hundred years ago, and it has been entered many and many a time since then. I believe that it is very near us; that it is with us—although some here have an idea that we are not to look for the entrance until after death.

Perhaps the most poetic expression of Friends understanding and experience of the Kingdom of God occurs in the following description from Francis Howgill (1618-1669):

the Lord of Heaven and Earth we found to be near at hand; and as we waited upon him in pure silence, our Minds out of all things, his Dreadful Power . . . appeared in our Assemblies, when there was no Language, Tongue nor Speech from any Creature. The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a Net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. . . . we often said one unto another, with great joy of Heart, “What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men?”²

Though our human instincts lure us to and bind us to earthly empires where greed and conflict rule, the Light Within shows us the way to the Kingdom of God, where love rules. That

² Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found*, page 233.

Kingdom is all around us, all the time, and we *choose* to live in it by living according to its rules, the main one being: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Living in the Kingdom of God does not guarantee a happy, carefree life; we will all still suffer and still die. But we do so with more purpose and meaning and with greater grace in the Kingdom of God.